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Extreme Users are the Experts

Michael Tubbs, *City of Stockton*

January 13, 2016

Video URL: <http://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/3632/Extreme-Users-are-the-Experts>

Stockton civic leader Michael Tubbs explains how all the advice on political campaigning by so-called experts ran contrary to what appealed to voters when he first ran for city council in 2012. Tubbs says the message of his campaign to improve people's lives came from speaking to those less fortunate, and often ignored, in the neighborhood.



Transcript

February 20, 2012, after a sign language class, I rushed down to Stockton for my campaign kickoff. I was going to run for city council in Stockton. And the second lesson from the campaign is the idea that expert advice really isn't all that expert. When I was first running for office-- first of all, people said I was crazy, which is probably true. You're crazy, Stockton just had back-to-back years of record homicides. You're crazy, you're running against the incumbent, who's chair of his party. You're crazy, because there's no way the city of Stockton is going to elect a 22-- 21-year-old at the time-- black kid from south Stockton to help in its resurgence. There there's no way. You're crazy. And then when I said I was going to run anyway, all the experts, the consultants, the people who make a lot of money to advise, the people who've been doing this for a long time, they said, you know what, Tubbs, you're young. So grow some facial hair. I'm trying, you see. [LAUGHTER] They said, you're young, grow some facial hair, so you look a little bit older. Or they said, you're young, so stay away from young people and youth issues.

Don't speak to any of that. Talk about grown up issues. And then they said, talk about the bankruptcy. Talk about how the city is bankrupt, and finances. And that's what's going to resonate with voters. And luckily, being 21, and a little bit dumb and foolish, we didn't listen to any of that. Because what we found, in knocking on doors and talking to people, is that my youth is what made people most excited. We had 70-year-old grandmothers from the south side and the north side saying, wow, I like the fact that you're young. That gives me hope for my grandchild, or my child. We had armies of young people knocking on doors every Saturday. And it's easy to close a door on, like, a Jehovah's Witness. It's easy to close a door on a salesman.

It's hard to close a door on the 12-year-old, adorable kid, who's saying, Michael Tubbs for City Council. And we found that-- seriously, it works. And we found that every single thing the experts were telling us to do, although true for them, were wrong in the special case of this campaign. Experts also talked about things, like, only talk to people who vote. But before we hired the campaign consultant, we had no idea what we were doing. So I said, to win a race, you have to knock on doors and talk to people. But I didn't know there was any strategy to that. I thought you just picked the neighborhood, you knocked on every door, you talked to everybody, and that's how you win. So that's what we did. But we started with what I learned at the D-School to be known as extreme users. We started in one of the poorest housing developments in the city. Probably not with a lot of voters.

And we spent two weeks just knocking on every door there, talking to them about their hopes, their aspirations, and what they wanted for the city. But it was in talking to this extreme user group-- the group that wasn't on our nation builder files, that won't show up on voter registration roles-- that we found our campaign message. It was really one about moving the city forward, and that many communities had felt bankrupt for a long time-- that the city's financial bankruptcy was only a symptom of a deeper bankruptcy in leadership, in moral bankruptcy, and a bankruptcy of vision. And that's what we ran on. So everyone

was talking about the fiscal constraints, and bankruptcy, really important topics. But for voters, they wanted to talk about what's the vision for Stockton. People were talking about entitlement reform and things of that sort, very important conversations. But the voters we talked to were like, Mr. Tubbs, we've been feeling bankrupt for a long time. We listen to gunshots, it's violent, it's not safe. And it's so, so funny, because afterwards, when we got the experts in, we stopped doing a lot of that outreach, and all that hard work, and talking to people who may not vote, because of resource constraints. But I humbly submit there's no way we would have picked a message that resonated with so many people, if we had not talked to the extreme users, the people who don't vote, the people who aren't going to donate, because they really helped define the message, and one that resonated city wide.